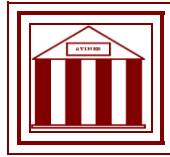


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**Characters and Identity Formation:
An Ecocritical Reading of some
Italian Short Stories**

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University of Split
Croatia**

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**Characters and Identity Formation:
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Abstract

When we speak of the importance and meaning of literature in the contemporary world, we cannot avoid taking into consideration its importance for the sustainability of the contemporary society. Since to live sustainably means to live the fulfilling life in harmony with nature, the ecocriticism studies must inevitably be taken into consideration because they point out to the ways in which it is possible to achieve the sustainable community. If we use the ecocritical approach to the analysis of the text, we may examine how, in a literary context, different gendered, cultural, or racial background of individuals may influence the way in which the society treats them, resulting in marginalization and rejection of some members considered less important than others, and predominance of the stronger ones. However, the importance of the ecocriticism lies in the fact that, by the means of a literary text, it aims to provide equal life quality for all its members. The illustrative example of the text in which we may analyze the importance of the study of how an individual can, following the example of the balanced relations in nature, try to improve his social situation, we find in the Italian immigrant literature. In the immigrant literature, in the research of their identity, the characters necessarily run into the collective identity of the community to which they are immigrating and, when transferring into the new community, they have to face different obstacles in order to become its members.

Therefore, the present article aims to analyze, by using the methodology of ecocriticism, the formation of the individual identity in some short stories by the Italian immigrant writer Igiaba Scego. In her short stories the characters are divided between the two identities, that of the country of origin and that of the society they live in, but in the end they succeed to achieve the balanced relations with other members of that society.

Keywords: identity formation, immigrant literature, Italian literature, ecocriticism

Introduction

When she speaks of the fundamentals and the future of ecocriticism¹, Loretta Johnson points out that “when subject to ecocriticism, literature of all periods and places – not only ecocentric or environmental literature or nature writing – but all literature, is viewed in terms of place, setting, and/or environment, all of which have taken on richer meaning.”² The setting becomes of the greatest importance in the texts in which the characters leave their country of origin and move into the new country, so they have to deal with all the aspects of the new environment in the society they are immigrating to.

One of the two key words of ecocriticism is binary opposition, which means that in every community, which is characterised by the relations that are not balanced, there are two different poles, the «strong one», or, better to say, the dominant one, and the «weak one», the dominated one. These oppositions should be overcome, as the tendency in nature is to achieve and maintain the balanced relations, which are not possible if there is a binary opposition between various members of one society. According to the hypotheses of ecocriticism, the same balanced relations, which characterize nature, should be actualized also in the society, since the aim is to achieve the balance among all its members. The second key word, in close relation to the first one, is the “reciprocal dependence”³, which is necessary for all the humans, in order to create the so called “horizontal society” characterized by the absence of hierarchy.

Serpil Oppermann stresses that “[e]cocriticism does enable the critic to examine the textualizations of the physical environment in literary discourse itself, and to develop an earth-centered approach to literary studies. In this case, crossing of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman spheres would enable the ecocritic to analyze the ways in which an ecological vision is addressed or subverted in literary texts.”⁴ But most important of all is that ecocriticism focuses “on the textual strategies of literary texts in constructing an ecologically informed discourse about the ways in which humans interact with other life forms.”⁵ This means that the ecocritical thinking should point

¹Serpil Oppermann defines ecocriticism with these words: “Ecocriticism is a new critical movement that attempts to link literary criticism and theory with today’s ecological issues. It studies the relationship between literature and the science of ecology by applying ecological concepts to literature. Its aim is to synthesize literary criticism and the environmental matters by focusing on the literary analyses of the representations of nature in literary texts, and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses.” (Oppermann, S. “Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder”, accessed February 2014, <http://www.edebiyatdergisi.hacettepe.edu.tr/1999162SerpilOppermann.pdf>, p. 29.)

²Johnson, L. 2009. “Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism”, *Choice*, http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/Ecocriticism_essay.pdf, p. 7.

³Cfr. Iovino, S. 2006. *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, Milano, Edizioni Ambiente, p. 60.

⁴Oppermann, S. “Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder”, cit., p. 34.

⁵Ibid.

our attention towards the analysis and the research of ethical values in the text, which can eliminate prejudices and discrimination of some members and give us the example of sustainable society and sustainable culture. In the nowadays world, if we observe the crisis of the contemporary society, a primary aim of each member of the society should be the realization of sustainable society. It results that, when applying the methodology of ecocriticism to a literary text, we may learn about the long-term ecological balance from it, and, as a consequence, study how an individual may, by the means of finding examples of balanced relations, which do not harm any part or element of nature, in a literary text, try to improve his social situation, by achieving balanced relations in his community. So Oppermann concludes that the “[e]cocritical approach [...] is one that attempts to transcend the duality of art and life, human and natural, and to work along the principle of interconnections between them. Establishing an ethical and aesthetic ground towards a renewed understanding of both literature and ecology is the purpose behind. In this respect, ecocriticism offers a unique fusion of literary, scientific, ecological and philosophical perspectives.”¹

This is particularly important when we speak of immigrant literature. What characterizes mainly this kind of literature is that its characters, since they too are often forced to immigrate, find themselves in the new society, where they feel the strong need to survive and to create the balanced living conditions. This means that they try to achieve the balanced relations with other members of the society, not harming anyone as well as that they support equal rights and duties for the immigrants as for the Italians, i.e. they try to achieve and maintain the sustainable way of living. However, they often find themselves exposed to prejudices, discrimination, and racism, so, in order to focalize the possible solutions for the «weak» members and, in order to let them survive in the new society, ecocriticism becomes of the greatest importance because it helps to focus on the textual strategies which point out to the examples in the texts of how to surpass the conflict social situation and how to regain the balanced relations among all the members of a society.

In this analysis, a particular importance is given to the immigrant literature written by the Italian writers whose parents have immigrated to Italy; namely, in their texts the focus is often on the characters who are divided between the two identities, that of the country of origin and that of the society they live in, i.e. the new society to which they are immigrating. However, although being the victims of marginalization, in the end they succeed to achieve the balanced relations with other members of that society and they give us the example of how to achieve the sustainable society. Hence, in this article we focus on two short stories of the Italian writer of Somali origin, Igiaba Scego², in order to

¹Ivi, p. 38.

²Igiaba Scego was born in Italy from Somali parents expatriated in 1969 after the coup of Siad Barre. Her first works are *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (2003) and *Rhoda* (2004); the second one is a story of three Somali immigrant women. She is also the authoress of various short stories in which she mainly questions the problems of identity. (Cfr. Kuruvilla, G., Mubiayi, I., Scego, I. and Wadia, L. 2003. *Pecore nere*, e-book, Roma – Bari, Gius. Laterza

describe and analyse dual identity which coexists peacefully in some Scego's characters. However, it is important to underline that this peaceful co-presence of two ethnic identities is something to which Igiaba's characters will arrive eventually.

Igiaba Scegos's Characters and their Identity Formation

In her work, Scego frequently problematizes the motif of identity and non-identity and questions whether a person having a dual identity, the one he or she has gained with the birth in one country and the one he or she has gained since he or she or his/her parents have immigrated to another country, can live without being discriminated among other members of society having only one identity. Besides, the autobiographical element is strongly present in her work, in which she describes characters whose Somali and Italian identities intertwine. Also, in her texts there are focused numerous elements which together contribute to the creation of a person's identity, as well as cultural and traditional habits. So the focus in this paper is on individualizing how the characters achieve to have balanced life conditions in the case of co-presence of dual identity.

One of Scego's most important short stories is *Salsicce (Sausages)*, in which the questioning about the identity is provoked by an everyday life habit, i.e. that of preparing food for lunch. Namely, in *Salsicce* the authoress uses sausages to examine the problem of identity in the main character of Somali origin; starting from the premise that, because of her religious beliefs, she does not eat pork, when the female character, who has immigrated to Italy, decides to buy some pork sausages and cook them, she also starts to examine whether, basing the conclusion upon her reaction in front of the sausages, she could be defined as Italian or Somali woman. In the beginning it seems that she has no particular reason to start questioning herself: "I do not know what got into me, I swear I do not know. Actually, my awakening was not brusque, there were no jolts, no violent headaches, no blood pressure values lower than normal, nothing! It was a morning like any other, or at least I thought so."¹ However, she starts to examine if it is possible to have dual identity or not and whether, in that case, a person with dual identity can live in the same way as other characters that have only one identity, i.e. they were born in the same country in which they are residents, as well as their parents. This idea has been present

& Figli, p. 3. and cfr. Masri, M., Mubiayi, I., Qifeng, Z., and Scego, I., *Amori bicolari*, e-book, Roma-Bari, Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2013, p. 3). In 2003 Scego won the literary prize Eks&Tra for migrant writers and was the first "daughter of immigrants" to win an international literary prize ("Premio Mondello" in 2011). (Cfr. Biletta F. (ed.) 2013. "Igiaba Scego. Invito alla lettura", accessed March 2014, http://www.centrocabral.com/761/Igiaba_Scego)

¹Scego, I. 2013. *Salsicce*, in: Kuruvilla, G., Mubiayi, I. Scego, I. and Wadia, L., *Pecore nere*, e-book, Roma – Bari, Gius. Laterza & Figli, p. 16. (All the quotations from Italian texts have been translated into English by Nikica Mihaljević.)

in the character's mind for a long time and now, for the first time in her life, she faces it directly.

The first identity examination happens while Scego's character is at the shop, determined to buy sausages, where the sales girl makes her an embarrassing question: "«But dear, have you converted? Wasn't it a sin for you to eat sausages?»"¹ This simple question makes her examine her identity, and since she has no clear answer in mind, she feels to be forced to say a lie. Later on, when she comes back home, she feels that the sausages "ask" her to, finally, find the truth and give a precise answer on her identity: "Now I am in the kitchen with my pack full of impure sausages and I don't know what to do! Why, the fuck, I have bought them? And now what should I do?"² Therefore, the sausages obtain the role of the examiner, since they test the character's idea of her identity, and they rouse her to finally declare herself as either Italian or Somali.

The vision of the sausages puts the character in front of the series of questions: first, she has to decide in which way to prepare them, and then she has to reveal to herself whether she is intending to eat them or not. Therefore, the sausages question from various points her identity as well as different aspects of her character, like whether she is brave enough to refuse the Italian culture, although living in Italy, or not:

"But then, will I eat them really, all whole, or not? Or will I, in the best moment, lack the courage and throw them? [...] but is it really worth the effort? If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am Italian like them? Identical to them? Or will it have been a pointless stunt?"³

At this point we understand that the test of eating sausages has the aim to convince the character-narrator herself, who does not know in which way she can prove her identity, of the fact of being Italian as well as Somali and, hence, that she has two cultures mixed in her. This proves also that this questioning the identity bothers her strongly, since she feels the constant need to prove herself to others: "My beautiful passport was burgundy and it stresses in all respects my Italian nationality. But was that passport truthful? Was I really Italian in my intimacy?"⁴ The doubt that she feels has been strongly engraved in her memory since from the early childhood she has been often questioned whether she preferred Italy or Somalia and that question was for her like asking to choose between a mother and a father: "That hateful question about my fucking identity! More Somali? More Italian? Maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ Somali and $\frac{1}{4}$ Italian? Or maybe the opposite is true? I cannot answer."⁵ It results that the society puts

¹Ibid.

²Ivi, p. 17.

³Ibid.

⁴Ivi, p. 18.

⁵Ivi, pp. 19-20. In another story, *Una donna, due mondi* written by another immigrant author, Samira Garni, the narrator speaks of the same questions that the immigrants, or, more

us in front of the questions on our identity and forces us to give a clear and precise answer, although it is not easy to have a clear vision of the identity in the multicultural society of nowadays. Therefore, the narrator gets angry with herself when she cannot give unambiguous answers: “I am not a hundred percent: I have never been and I do not think I will be able to become one now. I think I am a woman without identity. Or, better, with multiple identities.”¹ At this point she starts questioning which elements of her character describe her as Italian, and which as Somali:

“I feel Italian when: 1. I have a breakfast with sweet foods; 2. I go to visit exhibitions, museums, and monuments; 3. When I speak of sex, men, and depression with my friends; 4. When I watch movies with Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, Monica Vitti, Totò, Anna Magnani, Giancarlo Giannini, Ugo Tognazzi, Roberto Benigni, Massimo Troisi; 5. When I eat a 1,80 euro stracciatella, pistachio, and coconut icecream without cream; [...].”²

From the long list it results that she actually comprises in herself both identities and that she is as much Somali as Italian but that the society has created all the fuss around it.³ Also, the list points out to various characteristics which usually, according to various prejudices and clichés, describe Italian and

precisely, the sons and daughters of immigrants, are often asked to answer: “«But do you feel better here or did you feel better there?»

How can you ask a tree if it needs more the land which preserves its roots or the air and the light that surround its branches?

That question reminds me of the one usually made to the son of the divorced parents:

«Do you love more your mother or father?» «Do you want to live with your mother or father?» (Garni, S. 2012. *Una donna, due mondi*, in: Finocchi, D. (ed.), *Parabola di chi viene e chi va. 20 racconti delle autrici di “Lingua Madre”*, e-book, Torino, Edizioni SEB27, p. 34.)

¹Scego, I. *Salsicce*, cit., p. 20.

²Ibid.

³In the short story cited in the note 13, the narrator tries to show the relativity of reality when describing different habits and traditions in different cultures and ethnic groups, based on common ancestral, social, cultural, or national experience: “Who lives on the border often becomes involved in the situations that sometimes make you laugh, while sometimes they leave behind a trail of exclamation points alternated with questions.

The marriage... in Italy:

- How old are you?

- Twenty-one.

- What are you doing here in Italy?

- I am married.

- O my God, you are so young! You are still a girl... but, yes, it is known, in your country that is the way you live!

The marriage... in Morocco:

- How old are you?

- Twenty-one.

- You’ve become a nice lady, when is the happy event?” (Garni, S. *Una donna, due mondi*, in: Finocchi, D. (ed.), *Parabola di chi viene e chi va. 20 racconti delle autrici di “Lingua Madre”*, cit., p. 35.)

Somali people but which in this text are presented as advantages, and not elements for discrimination. Hence, since the society has created all the fuss about nothing, the character concludes that it is logical to ask ourselves why not abolish identities.¹ From this questioning of one's identity we understand that the differences among persons are socially imposed and that they are usually used in order to differentiate people and to control them, while the persons themselves do not live these differences as problems. That is why the narrator, from the day she was born, feels marginalized only because of her different ethnicity:

“I could be a perfect victim, nobody behind to defend me. A perfect scapegoat, the perfect «black» woman to be beaten. Strange that nobody has thought about it. I am black and I think it's a jinx to be black. There is no escape, you have already been doomed to be the subject of glances askew – at best – or of beatings, burnings, stoning, rapes, crucifixions, killings – at worst.”²

In the end, Somali or Italian, this fact should not change the character's life, unless other member of her society uses it as the element for discrimination. Therefore, the character finally understands that the whole analysis of which identity characterizes her more is spurred by her analyzing whether she may or she may not eat sausages: hence, if she stops torturing herself by looking for a precise and unique answer, she feels that she would also learn how to deal with all the questions regarding the dual identity which the society asks her to answer.

The whole event of eating sausages assumes the importance of a religious ceremony: she chooses one of the plates that she adores, the last one of the set, and she underlines that it is difficult for her to decide to throw that plate (“I want a perennial trophy for my venture.”³); the plate symbolizes the cut with the past that she feels she has to do, so she transforms the eating of the sausages in a ritual similar to baptism. However, in the moment when she needs to take a bite, she starts vomiting, and that convinces her that eating the sausages would be pointless because it won't erase her dual identity:

“Besides, friend, you should know that we blacks cohabit with the suspicion that everybody judges us from our skin colour. Actually, it is so, but we delude ourselves that it isn't so! We are accused of

¹“One big problem, that of the identity, and what if we abolished it? And what about fingerprints? Also to be abolished! I feel to be everyone, and, at times, I do not feel anyone. Like, for example, when I am on the bus and I hear something like «these foreigners are the bane of Italy» and I feel people's eyes stuck while staring at me [...]” (Scego, I. *Salsicce*, cit., p. 20.)

²Ivi, p. 23.

³Ivi, p. 21.

having guilty conscience, of invoking racism at the slightest trifle, but do you want to know something? Racism is not a joke.”¹

In the end, she understands that the truth lies somewhere in between and that she was asking from herself to eat a sausage while vomiting in order to show that she doesn't have “guilty conscience”², but she realizes that she cannot have guilty conscience only because of her skin colour or because of her origin. Therefore, when she throws the sausages in the garbage, she comprehends that nothing can change the fact that she has dual identity, but that other members of the society have to change their attitude, i.e. that a man has to refuse discrimination in order to disallow to become, at the same time, its victim. Therefore, the narrator concludes her examination with a rhetorical question: “But how could I have thought to eat them? Why do I want to deny myself [...]?”³

Is Identity that Important?

The same identity analysis is emphasized in Scego's short story *Identità* (*Identity*), but provoked in a different way than in the short story *Salsicce*. Namely, the identity crisis is provoked by a newspaper article on the “mixed” couples, i.e. in which one of the members of the couple is Italian and the other is of different nationality or ethnic origin, and in which there are listed numerous prejudices on people coming from different ethnic groups. The article was written with the intention to point out to the obedience and submissiveness of foreign women in comparison to Italian women and in that characteristic the author of the article wanted to find the explanation for the fact that numerous Italians fall in love with women of different ethnic origin:

“Italian women are hysterical, Italian women are too concentrated on the career, Italian women are just not feminine enough... instead, the foreigners let you do what you want. [...] A dog waiting only for the move of the master. [...] He gives and he takes away. She knows it and it's okay for her.”⁴

Prejudices in the article are also connected with the fact that usually the Italians marry the foreigners in the second marriage:

“Often beautiful foreigners are the second companions, younger, more beautiful, and compliant. In those areas the feminism has not

¹Ivi, p. 23.

²Ivi, p. 24.

³Ivi, p. 25.

⁴Scego, I. 2013. *Identità*, in: Masri, M., Mubiayi, I., Qifeng, Z. and Scego, I., *Amori bicolori*, e-book, Roma-Bari, Gius. Laterza & Figli, p. 7.

arrived. They fight with other weapons, seduction, and submissiveness... as in ancient times.”¹

When Fatou, the main character of this Scego’s work, who has been interviewed for this newspaper article, reads the article published, she feels disgust and pain because she identifies with the “beautiful foreigners” described in the article, since she too is in a relationship with an Italian, Valerio. But Fatou, who has often been the object of prejudices, remembers that “sometimes she was afraid of not being up to juggle among all the colours of the city... among all the colours of her home”² because in that multicultural society, discrimination still frequently occurs.

The arrival of Fatou’s half sister Nura makes Fatou feel the problem of different ethnic identity as much more serious. Nura thinks that persons having different ethnic identities should not have a relationship; in this character, there are embodied all the prejudices of a person from one ethnic group against someone of different ethnicity:

“«Are you still seeing the *gaal*»? she asked her. [...] When Nura said *gaal*, meaning unfaithful, Fatou felt her vein throbbing on the right temple. In that word she noted the disapproval, carelessness, and a lot of ignorance.”³

The envy toward her sister was disguised in Nura by the hatred of foreigners. It was useless to insist on pointing out that Fatou was in love with her Italian boyfriend as well as it was useless trying to convince the sister that her relationship with Valerio was balanced because they both didn’t want to change each other because they accepted their differences as richness of their couple. Instead of trying to change the other, they both, Fatou and Valerio, wanted to know better each of the two cultures and to use this acquaintance and knowing as advantage, as an element that completes their personalities; for example, it was Valerio who wanted to name their sitting room the “small African corner”, while the journalist has written in the article that “*it was Fatou the one who wanted to impose to Valerio her style*. Instead, it was almost true the opposite. It was him, Valerio, to be born in Africa. She had never been to Africa.”⁴ Therefore, when Fatou is asked on her identity, she answers:

“«I was lost inside the map, and now I am here with you, I carry pain in my heart, a land that has disappeared. My Somalia has been at war for a lifetime. Who am I, my love? I don’t know. I never really knew it. I was born in a foreign land. Despite all, I know I am not a foreigner to anybody»”⁵

¹Ivi, p. 8.

²Ivi, p. 9.

³Ivi, pp. 11-12.

⁴Ivi, p. 17.

⁵Ivi, p. 19.

However, to live in balance with these convictions, in the beginning Fatou thinks that, if her sister accepted the co-presence of the two cultures in her life, she would feel like it was the whole Somali nation that was approving her dual identity in which her Somali culture co-existed together with the Italian one: “She only knew that she needed the consent of that fleshy ball woman.”¹ However, in the end, by describing Fatou’s decision, the authoress points out that a question of dual identity or two people of different ethnic identities living together cannot be the object of prejudices and stereotypes in the society nowadays: Fatou concludes that she doesn’t need to convince anybody but herself and she decides to find peace in and around her and the way to live with prejudices but not let them change her into someone that she really wasn’t. Hence, the symbolical act of ripping the newspaper article gives her the freedom to say ‘no’ to discrimination and to concentrate on looking for peace in herself. When she succeeds in doing that, the society around her becomes irrelevant and, all of a sudden, she finds the approval: “She felt light. She was no more exotic, nor unfaithful. It was only her, her words, her belly.”² By accepting the ethnic diversity as richness of all the members of the society, makes of her and of the persons around her, tolerant members of their community.

Conclusion

If we confront with a literary text using the ecocritical methodology, we examine in it the presence or the absence of ethical values and sustainable behaviour and, since literature helps us to find these values in the world around us, its role in laying the foundation for creating the sustainable society becomes obvious. The immigrant authors often give in their texts numerous examples of prejudices and discrimination towards some members of the society, which describe the reality in contradiction with the “reciprocal dependence”, i.e. with the main objective of ecocriticism. Hence, Igiaba Scego’s texts give the examples of dual identity of the characters which moved from one country to another and, as a result of that, perceive and live the differences between the country of origin and the country of immigration. However, it is these differences that spur them to experience and live the differences as advantages and not disadvantages, so they are stimulated to find the way how to surpass prejudices, discrimination, and marginalization and live in balance with other members of the society by the means of accepting the co-presence of discrepant aspects of their identity and fusing them into one unity in which all the elements succeed to live in peace. These characters are the examples of the so called “horizontal society” for which the ecocritics find the examples in the natural environment and which is the only one to guarantee the survival of the

¹Ibid.

²Ivi, p. 25.

present society, while dealing with the crisis of the contemporary world, by finding, accepting, and applying the sustainable culture.

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